



" A PENNY

PLAIN,

TWOPENCE COLOURED "





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"A PENNY PLAIN, TWOPENCE COLOURED"  
OR, THE DRAMA IN PASTEBOARD

An Exhibition of toy theatre material from the Juvenile Drama Collection  
at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library  
University of Toronto

December 16, 1974 through January 1975

The English toy theatre, once a treasured toy of the Victorian nursery, had its beginnings in the souvenir theatrical portraits of the late eighteenth century. These portraits, actual likenesses of the performers themselves, were well-executed by such distinguished engravers as Hogarth (1697-1764), Rowlandson (1756-1827) and Gillray (1757-1815) who were satisfying a growing public demand for take-home reminiscences of favourite actors and actresses then appearing in current London stage hits.

However, the success of this new popular art created two major problems: how to produce these portraits cheaply while the play was still fresh in the public mind; and how to display all the favourites from a single play at the same time. George Speaight, the eminent English toy theatre historian, has suggested that around 1810, someone conceived the idea of publishing four small but different theatrical figures together on one sheet. The characters would have been from the same play, and the name of each performer would have appeared under each figure. Such a sheet might have been headed, "Characters from Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp performed at Covent Garden"; but no example of such a four-character sheet is known to exist. However, early in 1811, William West was already publishing from his Circulating Library on Exeter Street off the Strand sheets of 6 or 7 characters each, several of which do survive. Each sheet sold for a penny plain to be coloured at home, or for twopence already hand coloured at the shop.

Many of these early souvenir character sheets were engraved by well-known artists - William and Henry Heath, George Cruikshank and George Childs. At first, they were intended for the entertainment of young people, or "juveniles", hence the other name for the toy theatre, the "juvenile drama". Young people who collected these souvenirs probably began embellishing them in some way - colouring, cutting-out and mounting them. Soon someone else, perhaps one of the many other publishers, included a few scenes and wings copied from actual stage productions to make the souvenir more complete. When the playbook of accompanying words and small stages, replicas of Drury Lane or Covent Garden, became available, the theatre in miniature had arrived completely.





Until the mid-nineteenth century, these "juvenile drama" sheets represented fairly accurately the contemporary London stage - the set designs, costumes and acting style of the best Regency and early Victorian melodramas, pantomimes and equestrian spectacles. Later, the characters and scenery became standardized and stereotyped, remote from any actual performance and through the wider distribution of the numerous sheets published by Martin Skelt, juvenile drama became popularized. One noticeable result of this commercialism was a decline in the artistic quality of the sheets; the drawings were less accurate and the colouring less sophisticated. Thus it was that juvenile drama developed into a rough-and-ready children's toy.

Many well-known people retained happy memories of growing up with a toy theatre - Winston Churchill, J.B. Priestly, the Sitwells, Charlie Chaplin and Gordon Craig. In "A Christmas Tree", Charles Dickens reminisced:

"... the toy theatre, - there it is, with its familiar proscenium, and ladies in feathers, in the boxes! - and all its attendant occupation with paste and glue, and gum, and water colours, in the getting up of the Miller and his Men, and Elizabeth, or the Exile of Siberia."

The most vivid recollections of a childhood influenced by toy theatre are found in Robert Louis Stevenson's famous essay "A penny plain, and twopence coloured" published in 1884, in which he immortalized the toy theatre in the person of its best known publisher, Skelt. All owners of toy theatres have agreed that it was the choosing, painting, colouring and mounting of the characters and sets that was the most fun. The actual performance was usually a failure. As Stevenson wrote:

"You might, indeed, set up a scene or two to look at; but to cut the figures out was simply sacrilege; nor could any child twice court the tedium, the worry, and the long-drawn disenchantment of an actual performance. Two days after the purchase the honey had been sucked."

There were many other nursery pastimes that contributed to and influenced the direction taken later by those early theatrical prints: "turn ups", or flap picture books (ca. 1770) which outlined the antics and adventures of Harlequin; cut-out dolls and later, cut-out character books with moveable heads and bodies; and finally the ever-popular water-colour painting books (ca. 1780). In fact, all paper toys became increasingly favourite in the nursery, even though they lacked movement. When toy theatre was introduced there, movement had come to paper and cardboard.

Today, the toy theatre is a lively and colourful historical monument to the British stage as it existed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Gordon Craig remarked that England had the worst grown-up theatre but the best toy theatre in the world. One might argue that in this century as adult theatre improved, toy theatre declined in popularity. It succeeded in the nineteenth century because it reflected the theatre of its age; how-





ever, it is difficult for such entertainment to flourish now when its best offerings - melodramas, romances, equestrian spectacles - are merely occasions for laughter. Nevertheless, despite the dizzy routines followed by children and adults alike in this last half of the twentieth century, nostalgic memories of past magic and romance still linger in those brightly coloured cardboard figures that move silently across the miniature stage in their wooden slides.

## THE CASES

### CASE 1

WILLIAM WEST, 1783-1854

West, a print seller and distributor of cheap reading material from his Circulating Library on Hoxton Street, is generally credited with the idea of publishing more than one theatrical figure on a souvenir sheet. The principle characters were also displayed in changes of costume and varying acting attitudes. His earliest sheet is dated February 1811, and his first complete play, Timour the Tartar, appeared in 1812. Theatrical prints were now no longer merely "pretty pictures".

West appears to have been prosperous in the beginning. He advertised with trade cards, and he published a catalogue which proclaimed, "West's Catalogue of Original Tragic, Fancy, and Comic Characters. As performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Lyceum, Surrey, Astleys, Sadlers Wells, etc. etc. etc. ... The Whole of the Characters are Finely Engraved, from Original Drawings, in their exact Costume, and Printed on Fine Drawing Paper, purposely for Colouring. And Published by Permission of the Proprietors of the Different Theatres."

However, West died a poor man. There is a legend that rather than allow any other publisher to have his plates, he broke them all.

## SKELT FAMILY

The Skelt family is responsible for bringing the toy theatre into almost every middle class British home. Martin Skelt, a shoemaker, bought the stock of some of the many publishing firms which were closing in the 1830's due to the rise in the cost of living. He began shortly to re-issue some of these sheets, substituting his name for that of Orlando Hodgson or R. Lloyd, two of the engravers who sold him their stock. After coming into some money, he was able to publish a very extensive run of sheets, and sell them at a halfpenny each. Frequently, he published 5 or 6





editions of one play, such as "The Miller and his Men". The Skelt sheets were published as a family enterprise. At different times, either Martin, Matthew, Benjamin or Ebenezer was head of the business, and with the family monopolist instincts and its impressive distribution schemes, its work became available in every corner of Great Britain. Stevenson observed in his famous essay, "the name of Skelt itself has always seemed part and parcel of the charm of his productions".

## CASE 2

J.K. GREEN, 1790-1860

It is Green who claims to be the originator of the toy theatre. Although a sheet dated 1812 does survive under his name, Green at that time was publishing from West's address. For some unknown reason, Green disappeared in 1812 without trace for 20 years. When he reappeared in 1832, he was publishing once again under his own name, but from his own premises. It was now that he made his claim. In 1834, a book of words to a play proclaimed him to be "The Original Inventor and Publisher of Juvenile Theatrical Prints, Established 1808". He was not challenged by his contemporaries; however, historians today consider West, who showed the greatest mastery and clearest style, to be the original publisher of the sheets, and Green to be the one who perhaps saw the future possibilities of the "Juvenile Theatrical Prints".

Between 1832 and 1857, Green published over 50 plays. In some cases, he reduced their size and was able to sell the plain sheets for only a halfpenny each.

JOHN REDINGTON, 1819-1875

Redington, a printer, bookbinder, stationer and tobacconist, took over Green's business after his death in 1860. Redington had acted as an agent for Green, as well as selling for Skelt, Park and Webb, but in 1850, he began reissuing some of their sheets under his own name. He produced only a few originals, crudely drawn and undated. His daughter married Benjamin Pollock.

## CASE 3

BENJAMIN POLLOCK, 1856-1937

In 1876, when he was 21 and newly married, Pollock took over his father-in-law's business on Hoxton Street. He was never an originator of plays, but rather a conserver of tradition. His only original work





was to enlarge some scenes to accompany Green's Sleeping Beauty. Otherwise, he continued to reprint the plays he had inherited, still as well-coloured and clearly printed as the originals had been, for 60 years until his death.

In 1936, on the occasion of his 80th birthday, the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild mounted a commemorative exhibition in his honour. After his death, his daughter Louisa carried on for awhile, but was obliged to sell out in 1944. Shortly after the stock was removed, the shop was hit by a bomb, and ruined. It was finally demolished after the war during the rebuilding programme in the Hoxton area.

Louisa Pollock died in 1957.

#### CASES 4 - 6

W.G. WEBB, 1820-1890

In 1835, at the age of 15, Webb was apprenticed to Archibald Park, an etcher and lithographer who also published toy theatre plays and portraits. While serving his apprenticeship, he laid the foundations and built up the contacts for his own business. In 1847 he published his first play, doing his own drawing, engraving, and printing, as well as abridging the acting play-books and making them less stilted. Although at one time he did acquire some plates from Skelt, he managed to reissue only one title, Aladdin.

Webb was one of the last from the old school, along with Pollock, of juvenile drama publishers. He has the distinction of being the only one, apart from Park, who personally drew, engraved and printed his own plays.

He was succeeded in the business by his son, H.J. Webb (1852-1933), who was content merely to publish the plays of his father. The British Theatre Guild held an exhibition to honour Webb in 1926.

The following three cases display Webb's characters and scenes for "The Miller and his Men", the most famous of toy theatre productions, enlarged and elaborated by one Dr. Hughes of Broadstairs, Kent. Each scene is built and mounted on a wooden base for placing on the stage "ready set" to avoid the tedious delay between scene changes. There are separate sets of characters permanently fixed on wooden slides for use with each scene.

Dr. Hughes had been a member of the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild, formed in 1925 to revive interest in the old Juvenile Drama and to create a new technique for modern model theatre work.





CASE 7

Examples of Toy Theatre from Denmark and Spain. These are both twentieth century, probably pre-1930.

CASE 8

JACK BUTLER YEATS, 1871-1957

Although the commercial value of the toy theatre was uncertain at the turn of this century, there was a growing appreciation of its artistic charm. Jack Yeats, a brother of the poet, and an Irish artist whom some consider the greatest of the 20th century, was one of the few modern devotees of this art.

Beginning in 1900, Yeats wrote and staged at least six plays for his toy theatre. He not only drew and coloured the figures himself and wrote the script, but he also staged the plays. He eventually worked on a stage about forty inches wide, so that five or six children could get a good view of the action and not see the hands which manipulated the figures.

Elkin Mathews published three of these plays: The Scourge of the Gulph; James Flaunty or the Terror of the Western Seas; and The Treasure of the Garden.

THE TOY THEATRE TODAY

In 1944 when Louisa Pollock sold her father's business the 1300 copper plates, some once belonging to Green and Park, were bought by Alan Keene, a dealer in Rare Books and Manuscripts.

After the war Keene, in the company of Sir Ralph Richardson, Robert Donat and others, attempted a revival of toy theatre by commissioning J.B. Priestly to write a play expressly for them. "The High Toby" was presented on January 13, 1949.

Also displayed in this case are examples of modern children's cut-out books with modern editions of plays derived from the toy theatre.

